

Review: Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2017), Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd: How Amos Tutuola Can Change Our Minds

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Book Reviews

Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2017), *Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd: How Amos Tutuola Can Change Our Minds*, Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, ISBN 9956764655 (soft cover), 310 pp.

Nyamnjoh's insightful book offers an original, nuanced, and penetrative interpretation of the late Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, whose true value and influence were mainly recognised only after his demise. According to the writer, the book is about "the epistemological dimensions of how research is conceptualized and practiced in African universities caught betwixt and between the tensions and possibilities of interconnecting global and local hierarchies" (1). While the above captures a key focus of the text, I believe it really diminishes the extent and breadth of issues tackled in the book. The book criss-crosses orthodox disciplinary divides; represents a commentary on literature, on history, and more critically on the sociology of knowledge and serves as a critique of contemporary African intellectualism.

The book is even more interesting because it does not just draw on Nyamnjoh's pedigree as a fictional writer, whose use of English contrasts with Tutuola's broken English and peculiar use of syntax, or on the fact that Nyamnjoh is neither Nigerian nor Yoruba; it also reveals an understanding of Tutuola that should provoke jealousy amongst those who may wish to claim Tutuola as rightly theirs.

Nyamnjoh also deserves praise for combining the various dimensions of the spectral and surreal tales of Tutuola in a single narrative that valorises the African viewpoint in knowledge production. It was no mean feat to discuss the various writings of Tutuola – namely, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), *Ajayi and His Inherited Poverty* (1967), and *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts* (1982/1989) – in one systematically presented thesis.

It is equally fascinating how the author applies the notion of the "frontier African" in the text. Frontier Africans are those "who are able to successfully negotiate change and continuity and bring into conversation various dichotomies and binaries" (3). The agenda to reconfigure the knowledge system in Africa and to encourage the emergence of truly African epistemologies in our universities has found purchase in Nyamnjoh's writings of late. Tutuola and his novels – which establish a flux between the modern and traditional, between the global and the local, and between conventional realities and the spectral worlds of spirits, ghosts, and "devil-

ish” enchantments – are, for Nyamnjoh, nothing more than pedestals to further push an agenda very close to his intellectual heart. For instance, through his seamless excursion into “one dimensional” Christianity and his Yoruba cultural beliefs, Tutuola offers an example of the interconnectivity and complexity of conviviality championed by Nyamnjoh.

The book thus makes a case for a more reflexive and relevant African epistemology which, while not at daggers-drawn with Western unitarism and dualism, presents an alternative that both reflects and validates the African worldview. Nyamnjoh has opened the door for us all to ponder not only the addiction to Western dualism that currently pervades our knowledge systems but also the long-overdue imperative for genuine African intellectualism and knowledge systems which best valorise and celebrate Africa’s past and present.

Beyond what I see as the urgent revival of Tutuola, Nyamnjoh also calls for the reconfiguration of African knowledge systems through convivial scholarship. This sort of scholarship confronts and humbles the challenges associated with things such as “over-prescription, over-standardization, over-routinization and over-prediction” in the process of knowledge production.

Nyamnjoh’s quest for the real African scholar can be seen clearly in the following analogy he borrows from the narrator in Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*: “he is a veritable cosmopolitan crossroads creature in constant navigation, negotiation and conversation with dichotomies and boundaries in the interest of interdependence and conviviality” (151). In much the same manner, Nyamnjoh desires some nimble-footedness, incompleteness, interdependence, and conviviality from the African scholar. He contends that the assumed superiority of the West “is the result of borrowing without acknowledgement, dispossession without restitution, and debasement, appropriation and commodification of others without compunction and with impunity” (200).

Though Nyamnjoh contends that African scholars need to “(re)familiarize themselves with and encourage these popular modes of knowing and knowledge-making in the production of relevant, inclusive, negotiated, nuanced and complex social knowledge” (3), this is still another case of him being overly semantic and thus appearing to talk at the reader.

Nyamnjoh seems to elaborate the alternative to Western dualism very well. However, he does not mention the practical steps required to realise that aspiration. This is a critical lapse, especially when one recognises that the culture of assessment and learning in our universities, in spite of nascent cries for decolonisation, are becoming even more steeped in Western paradigms and frameworks.

Moreover, one may take issue with the obvious repetitions in the book and argue that a more concise approach could have reduced its length by about 50 pages. However, the author pre-empts this criticism and justifies his style of writing. His aphorism that “repetition is the mother of all learning” (30) seems untouchable. On another point, given the array of concepts exploited in the book and even the semantic challenges posed therein, it could have done with a subject index.

The task Nyamnjoh sets for African scholars is indeed challenging, and he is not in any way ambivalent about it. He contends that “disrupting colonial epistemologies is difficult but can in part be achieved through cross-disciplinary conversations and joint initiatives between natural and social scientists, and between scholars and academics in university institutions and actors involved with alternative and complementary traditions and practices of knowledge production, circulation and consumption” (33). It would appear that the time has come to take the above concerns beyond the realm of debate and encourage the emergence of a critical mass of scholarship on authentic “decolonization” of knowledge production and dissemination in Africa.

- Edlyne Eze Anugwom